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Justice for Youth

Supervisors Mark Ridley-Thomas and Sheila Kuehl are looking to reform how Los Angeles County provides legal counsel to those in the juvenile delinquency system, after a recently released report raised concerns about the quality of their legal defense.

When children and teenagers cannot afford an attorney, the County provides a public defender. If there is a conflict – such as when a public defender or, in some cases, alternate public defender is already representing another party in the case – the County hires a private “panel attorney,” who gets paid a flat fee of \$340-\$360.

In 2014, Supervisor Ridley-Thomas urged the County to commission an unprecedented analysis of the juvenile indigent defense system to ensure at-risk youth receive fair treatment in court. The Warren Institute at UC Berkeley School of Law conducted extensive interviews and surveys, case file reviews, and billing and payment analysis before reporting to the Board of Supervisors this month.

The [analysis](#) found the flat fee could be a disincentive for panel attorneys to spend additional time and effort on a case. It also noted the County has minimal to no oversight on its juvenile indigent defense system, including around panel attorneys’ caseloads and training. Nor does it monitor whether panel attorneys advocate for their young clients to receive services like housing, special education, and treatments for abuse, trauma, substance addiction and mental illness. The report showed this resulted in disparate outcomes, with youth represented by panel attorneys more likely to be sent to probation camps or transferred to the adult system.

Supervisors Ridley-Thomas and Kuehl called for reform, saying the structure of the juvenile indigent defense system has not changed in the 20 years since contracts with panel attorneys were first developed.

“The time has come for the County to take a serious look at how youth are represented and find that reform is critically needed,” they said in a motion. “It is now clear that the quality of legal representation of children in the County’s juvenile delinquency system is markedly uneven, and that a key element of the current organizational structure involving panel attorneys is insufficient and lacks oversight.”

The Board of Supervisors will hear the full motion on April 5.

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